

The Second Sunday of Easter
St. John 20:19-31
April 28, 2019
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Hiding in Fear

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

The text of the Gospel of John, written at least sixty to maybe over a hundred years after the events of Holy Week and the first Easter, records that after the experience of the empty tomb that Peter and the Women had on Easter morning, the disciples were hiding out in a room together “for fear of the Jews.”

As I reread these words last evening, after the most recent Synagogue shooting yesterday north of San Diego, California, it was like I had swallowed a stone and it stuck in my throat. What a nightmare! How could this be? Who would do such a thing? When will we stop blaming the Jews for everything from killing Christ to trying to hinder the growth of Christianity to interfering with peoples lives in many generations, like some conspiracy against the common man? Hitler did that, and now it is starting to happen in our country. The rant of the Neo-Nazi white supremacists in Charlottesville last year, rings in my ears as they marched through that community chanting, “Jews will not replace us!”

Let's settle this once and for all. The Jews did not kill Jesus. You and I did. If, as we say we believe, that Jesus died for us and for our sins, then our sins were what put him to death on that cross. He had all of us, every single one of us down through history and many not even born yet, in his mind when he suffered for our sins on the cross so we would not have to. He made the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices. So, if you ask me who killed Jesus, I must stand up and I stand accused and not only that, convicted. I have betrayed Jesus, and I continue to betray Jesus. How about you? And Easter also tells me that, though convicted, I am pardoned. I am forgiven. And the words of Jesus ring in my ears, ‘go, and sin no more.’

Jesus came to the Jews. The Jewish people were God's chosen people. Jesus himself was born as, lived as, and died as a Jew. The Disciples called him Rabbi. Jesus was buried according to Jewish ritual and customs. To blame the Jews for anything is ridiculous. They share no more blame than anyone of us. God loves the Jews with all God's heart.

The Jewish people are our forbearers, our forefathers and foremothers. They are our cousins in the faith in this loving God who gave God's self for us.

Indeed the chosen people of God have suffered much down through the years, from the bigoted scape-goating of blame for the crucifixion that the Roman Church perpetuated, totally ignorant, because the crucifixion was the necessary culmination of God's earthly visit among us. By God's cross we have gained life. Then came the Spanish Inquisition, which lasted from 1478 until as recently as 1834. That's less than 200 years ago! It is one of the more horrible moments in Christian history in which Jews who even converted to Christianity were branded heretics and many were put to death or exiled. Under Tomas' deTorquemada, the Inquisition used torture and confiscation of property to terrorize his victims. During his tenure alone, some 2000 Jews were burned at the stake. Muslims faced the same persecution in Spain at the same time and those who remained after all these horrors were driven out of the country. At the same time this was also happening to Jews in many kingdoms across Europe as they were expelled from their homes and countries. Then came the Holocaust. More than six million Jews murdered for their faith. Then came the Neo Nazis and White Supremacists of our day, around the world and in our country, our time.

First they came for... an oft-quoted poem, by the Rev. Martin Niemöller, who was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian born in Lippstadt, Germany, in 1892. He spent eight years [1937-1945] in a concentration camp-Dachau- until he was liberated by the Allies at the end of the war. Here are his famous words:

"First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the incurably sick, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not incurably sick.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

We ignore these words when we fail to identify our common humanity is with others: all other people, whether they are like us or not. God does not see those differences when God loves us. We are God’s children. What parent would fail to love their child, unconditionally as God loves us, come what may, no matter what?

My college roommate, a faithful Jewish believer all his life, now a 66 year-old man with Parkinson’s disease, is one of the finest people I know. Len has internalized the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures and lives his faith in the way Jesus taught us to live. He is one of the finest Christians I know, certainly a better man than I am, though he does not profess the Christian faith. He always puts people first over things and money, and in retirement, he lives simply in an older trailer in Florida. He is a lawyer by trade, but hasn’t practiced in years. When he was practicing law, he handled a number of cases about abused children from the equivalent of DCF in New Hampshire. In several cases, his huge heart led him to adopt several of these children to give them a decent and loving home. And He did! His big heart led him to drive one child 40 miles to church every week so she could grow up in her Christian faith. He helped all of them in school and is involved in their lives to this day. He is a humble man. And he is a great lifelong friend to me. Whenever I needed his support, he was there for me. He traveled to visit me while I was in seminary in New York, when I was having difficult times. He always provides me with love and support and wise practical and spiritual advice when I need it. This Easter, he sent me this card. In his own words he wrote Happy Easter and: “Chris-Find sunshine and hope in this season of Renewal...” Yet Len is one of the people some are led to blame and hate. Why? Why? Why? Why not give thanks for our relatives in the faith? Why not learn from them? They have remained faithful to God, despite the horrors and fear visited upon them.

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Think about it. If they feared the Jews, the disciples would have been fearing each other and most of all, Jesus. That is because they were Jews. The choice of words here is unfortunate. They feared the Jewish authorities and religious leaders, not other Jews like themselves. We would fear those corrupt and power hungry people also, and we do fear people like them in

our own time. But we should have no fear, no bottled up resentment or anger toward the Jewish people!

Look at What Jesus did when he walked into that room, his followers seeing him on the night of his resurrection for the first time. He did not say, 'hate the Jews.' He did not encourage them to go kill Pilate, the Romans or the Jewish authorities who inflicted this horrible death upon him, who hatefully and spitefully killed Him, did he? He did not instruct them to seek revenge for these things.

What did he say? "Peace be with you!" He encouraged them to preach forgiveness.

The people of the Tree of Life Synagogue just raised money for the Muslims who were attacked in their place of worship in New Zealand the same way they were. They found reason to find common humanity with these Muslims, rather than to hate them. This is the Peace of Christ at work.

We cannot live lives of hate, fear, and prejudice. These are a real cancer that will eat away at our souls and destroy our community and our nation. This is enough! When will we stand and say, no more? Dare we wait until they come for us? We must preach the love that Jesus taught and showed us in His life, death and resurrection. AMEN